

History of Portuguese Photography 1900-1938

In the first three decades of the 20th century, a number of significant social and political changes took place in Portugal. The country was going through the throes of a transition from a monarchy to a republic and it experienced a military dictatorship, followed in turn by a civilian dictatorship, which was to last until the revolution of 25 April 1974 and the advent of democracy.

In 1908, the regicide of Dom Carlos I and Prince Dom Luís signalled the beginning of the end of the monarchy. On 5 October, 1910, the First Portuguese Republic was proclaimed, ending a long period of dispute over the monarchy.

Between 1910 and 1917, the First Republic transformed the State apparatus and set in motion a series of political, social, cultural and economic changes, in a complete break with the governmental and administrative structures of the monarchy. However, although some measures were readily achieved as a natural consequence of these changes, internal disagreements coupled with the economic problems that already beset the country and were exacerbated by Portugal entering the First World War would eventually lead to a coup d'état (1926), led by General Gomes da Costa. He, in turn, imposed a military dictatorship, destroying all the hopes engendered by the republican ideals.

At the end of the First World War, the country was caught up in a serious financial crisis, which worsened, leading to a series of social tensions that caused inevitable disillusionment with the republican model. Even so, some of the government's actions helped to build a new structure for Portuguese society, such as the introduction of compulsory primary education, the separation between Church and State, and a proliferation of civil rights laws. These included the introduction of the divorce law and the implementation of a cultural policy supported by the State, with the creation, in 1911, of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the first museum of this type to be created at international level. The museum still exists today.

In 1932, the political baton passed into the hands of a civilian dictatorship, marking the beginning of the country's leadership by Oliveira Salazar and initiating one of the

longest periods of dictatorship in the history of Europe.

The dictatorship imposed at that time took on the name of the New State (Estado Novo) and this period saw the development of political strategies based on totalitarian ideology, inspired by both the Italian fascism of Mussolini and the Spanish fascism of Franco, with certain sympathy for German Nazism.

The regime of the New State (Estado Novo) was to be founded on a propaganda strategy that regarded the republican regime as a form of political, economic and social chaos. This justified the policy of regeneration followed by the new dictatorial regime, based on the introduction of law and order as well as a corporatist policy inspired by Christian values.

In cultural terms, the commitment that the First Republic (1910-1926) had shown in creating new cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres, libraries, etc., was to find its equivalent in a dictatorial version based on the idea of a “politics of the spirit”, (política do espírito) conceived by the director of the Secretariado Nacional de Propaganda (SPN – National Propaganda Secretariat), António Ferro. This body had been created as early as 1933 to meet the needs of the whole propaganda machinery of the New State, both internally and externally.

It was against such a troubled and confusing background of highly significant structural changes within the regime that Portuguese culture embarked on a series of movements introducing radical breaks with the past in terms of visual arts and literature.

By challenging models that tended towards academicism and establishing an art that was based on modernist foundations and on concepts such as futurism, these movements were to determine the direction of cultural life at the beginning of the 20th Century. Exhibitions proliferated, with more and more artists outlining a new artistic panorama, in a relationship that cut across several domains, such as literature, painting and illustration.

Between 1900 and 1938, Portuguese photography was confronted with this confused

and divisive historical climate, developing mainly along the following lines: photo-reportage, naturalistic pictorialism, “salonnard” amateurism and ideological photography, aspects that frequently overlapped with one another and were aligned with the political and cultural dynamics outlined above.

It is important to note that, in historical terms, these are aspects that have so far been the most visible and the most intensively studied, as well as having served as the basis for the development of many other interrelated facets, so that it is essential to complement the study of Portuguese photography with an analysis of other types of productions and contexts. Gaining knowledge and access to new photographic collections in such fields as scientific, heritage-based and colonial photography, to name but a few, has only been possible since the 1990s, with the growing institutional support and involvement that has arisen in this area. These collections now need to be studied and analysed in a context which seeks to understand the photographic object in a broader context, investigating the crossovers that occur in all areas of cultural, social and political life.

However, a comparative monographic study of the four aspects already outlined is still being carried out in greater depth and is regularly reviewed, in line with the contemporary historiographical understanding of photography. This focuses more on understanding photography's complex, permanent interconnections, to the detriment of a simple examination of the photographic object as something to be judged solely on its artistic merits.

In terms of the analysis outlined above, photography was to remain isolated from the general artistic movements, apart from a few episodic participations in some exhibitions, just as it was kept out of any discussions relating to the theory and the history of art of that period, being generally thought of as an exclusive universe, closed in on itself.

Kept isolated from the main artistic processes and movements of the time, it was through the medium of photojournalism and the ideological use of images that Portuguese photography produced some of its most innovative works.

Pictorialist/naturalist photography remained in the hands of the elite, with its

inevitable links to the emergence of national and international photographic exhibitions, making it impossible for an innovative aesthetic language to be developed in a structured manner. International pictorialism continued to be influential until much later, even though it had become interwoven, in Portugal, with a naturalist aesthetic, which put special emphasis on the picturesque and had a marked influence on Portuguese art, contaminating photography in particular.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the development of an illustrated press that was to use the photographic image to seal the new relationship between communication and the concept of news and events. Photographic modernity established itself through the ideological use of the image, in what was to amount to the construction of an identity somewhere between the photographic representation of reality and the concept of truth.

As a result, the Portuguese press at the time displayed high rates of growth and development with roughly 583 newspapers being published. Amongst the many periodical publications that were to give prime importance to the image, such as *Serões*, *Occidente*, *Brasil-Portugal*, *Semana Ilustrada* and *Tiro & Sport*, one publication stood out for its modernity: *A Ilustração Portuguesa* (1903-1924). Four pioneering photo-reporters from the first two decades of the 20th century were associated with this magazine: **Joshua Benoliel**, **Aurélio da Paz dos Reis**, **António Novaes** and **Arnaldo Garcez**.

A Ilustração Portuguesa was a weekly supplement to the newspaper *O Século*, famous for its republican tendencies. It became a benchmark for the early years of the illustrated press. As in the rest of the world, the technical evolution of the printing and typesetting processes brought with it the possibility of a genuine revolution in graphics and page layout. The presence of the image therefore became a factor capable of reformulating the whole of the textual content and restructuring the concept of narrative, as well as all the models used in the distribution and reception of the news item.

Throughout the years during which *A Ilustração Portuguesa* was published, the history of the country's political, social and cultural life can be closely linked to this

supplement, with its use of the photographic image reflecting its importance both as a witness to history and as the very agent that helped to produce it. As photojournalism emerges, it is also possible to understand the ontological relationship between photography and history, as well as the contaminations with which the different aspects of photography were to challenge the discourse of the representation and presentation of reality, something that is particularly visible in the work of Joshua Benoliel.

Joshua Benoliel was to be especially influential in developing the photo-reportage that was being produced in Portugal, because of the diversity, quality and sheer volume of work that he produced, while Aurélio da Paz dos Reis was also a leading figure in bringing photography and film to Portuguese culture. Both of them were charismatic personalities who, despite their divergent political positions, shared the same modern way of looking at things, and both of them represented the most innovative and internationally up-to-date area of photo-reportage.

The most important thing to be observed in Joshua Benoliel's photographic production is the diversity of territories that his images were to focus upon and delineate over a period of almost three decades. His early career was marked by rapid political transitions and their subsequent social repercussions, since he was the photo-reporter who witnessed the end of the monarchy, the advent and the fall of the Republic and the imposition of the military dictatorship. All of his work was marked by the concept of the city and the important role-played throughout this period by urban space, particularly the country's political and cultural capital – Lisbon. His versatility, his ability to interpret the instant, his sense of history and his modern perception of movement, transitoriness and wandering, all served to make Joshua Benoliel the finest example of the modern photo-reporter, completely in tune with the works of many of his European counterparts.

On the other hand, Joshua Benoliel's photo-reportage, as well as that of his pioneering colleagues, makes it possible to observe the most significant social changes of this period, such as the appearance of the common citizen, the anonymous passer-by, as an operative character in the visual space of the city and the modern mass media.

In fact, Joshua Benoliel's work and that of his colleagues also contributed to altering the mechanisms of political propaganda, given the new balance of power that the illustrated press now imposed on the mass media.

The ideological use of the photographic image was to give rise to a whole new nomenclature in communication between the political powers and the masses, which in this period was particularly evident in the evolution of the forms of representation used by the monarchy in its attempts to adapt to the new media available for the dissemination of its image in the illustrated press. The solemn and passive models of the studio portrait were to give way to ever more instantaneous images, mundane, relaxed and almost family-like, seeking to promote a modern image of monarchic power.

Reflecting upon and analysing the images published about the monarchy and the leaders of the emerging republican party is, in fact, an extremely valuable exercise in understanding the dynamics of the visual propaganda produced by each of the powers, and the media that they would use to do so. The increasingly tired and worn-out image of the monarchy led to its growing presence in newspapers and illustrated magazines, vying for attention with pictures of the republican leaders and seeking to identify itself with the images of the common people exploited by the Republican opposition.

The legacy of the photo-reportage of these first two decades of the twentieth century was complemented by the photographic production of Arnaldo Garcez, within the very particular context of the First World War and the Portuguese participation in it. The tragic campaigns of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps in Flanders were the subject of systematic, in-depth coverage by this reporter, leaving us with a set of some of the most important images about this world conflict.

In addition to its important social and cultural aspects, press photography takes on an intrinsic and very particular significance for our understanding of the modern relationship between photography and ideology, as well as the actual exercise of political power. As we shall see, this was, in fact, a relationship that would be developed and deepened during the dictatorship of the New State by a second

generation of photo-reporters.

At the same time, artistic and amateur photography became mixed together in practice and in the dynamics of their mutual co-existence. Specialist magazines proliferated, although without any great editorial continuity, as was the case with *O Boletim do Photo-Velo Club* or *Sombra e Luz*, whilst others became periodicals that served as leading benchmarks in their field, such as *Boletim Photographico* or *Arte Photographica*.

Boletim Photographico was one of the most active magazines between 1900 and 1914, and its collaborators included some of the photographers who had made the associative and aesthetic transition from the 19th to the 20th century, as was the case with **Arnaldo Fonseca** and **Júlio Worm**, who were the magazine's editors.

Acting in strict defence of pictorialism was the magazine *Arte Photographica*, published between 1915 and 1931 and edited by B. dos Santos Leitão, which sponsored some of the most significant photographic exhibitions to be held at the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes (National Society of Fine Art) in Lisbon.

In 1907, the Sociedade Portuguesa de Photographia (Portuguese Photographic Society, 1907-1914) was created. It was dependent upon the Sociedade de Propaganda de Portugal (Portuguese Propaganda Society), a body that was dedicated to the promotion of tourism within the country, and which presented itself as the first great photographic association of the 20th century, welcoming into its ranks amateurs and professionals alike, without any distinction being drawn between them. In 1910, it was responsible for organising an exhibition of "Artistic Photography" in the salon of the magazine *Ilustração Portuguesa*, in which the pictorialism of the *Linked Ring* established itself as an essential source of inspiration, while, at the same time, naturalism was also mixed in with the final result, via Portuguese painting.

Afonso Lopes Vieira, a writer, Annibal Bettencourt, a doctor, Júlio Worm, a professional photographer, and the rare female presence in photographic circles of Maria Lemos de Magalhães, were just some of the figures who, at that time, promoted the "aesthetic nature" of photography, rejecting "purely documentary photography",

as could be read in the regulations of the exhibition/competition, in this way clearly distinguishing the aesthetic terrain of the photographic image from that of the genre of reportage.

Domingos Alvão was, however, one of the most influential commercial and professional photographers of this period. For him, the documentary aspect was to be worked upon artistically in a naturalist aesthetic language, idyllic in nature and thus representing the “bridge between the descriptive naturalist photography of the 19th century and the pictorial photography of the 1910s”¹.

It is, therefore, well known that, in 1915, when the Viscount of Sacavém published a summary of photography in Portugal in the English magazine *Photograms of the Year*, it was the pictorialist genre that formed the essential subject-matter of his article, completely ignoring the documentary aspects linked to the press, which had begun to explore new photographic languages.

The participation of Portuguese photographers in international salons and events continued to be common practice, and what were considered to be the most relevant exhibitions were featured in the main periodicals, receiving exactly the same sort of coverage as was normally given to other artistic events. However, its practice and theoretical understanding continued to remain outside the main artistic movements in Portugal.

An example of this inability of Portuguese amateur and professional photographers or artists to understand not only the aesthetic changes, but also the transformations in perception, communication and ideology brought about by photography in the early 20th century, was clearly provided by the lecture that the portrait photographer **San Payo** dedicated to Futurist Photography, published in 1932², after the visit of Marinetti to Lisbon. San Payo showed that he did not understand the aesthetics of the movement, and even less so its photographic interpretation.

¹ Sena, António, *História da Imagem Fotográfica em Portugal 1839-1997* (Porto Editora, Porto, 1988), p. 212.

² in *A Voz*, (Lisboa, 13 June, 1932).

Nonetheless, there are all manner of modernist references to be found in the body of work produced by the man who was to be the official portraitist of the whole of the bourgeois, artistic and political elite, renewing the language of the studio portrait. His psychological approach, together with a technique that placed special emphasis on the *flo* or soft-focus effect, dramatic density and the exponentiation of light contrasts, was greatly appreciated by the new modernist bourgeois taste, enabling San Payo to hold several individual exhibitions, something that was quite unusual for a photographer at the time.

Attempts to bring the worlds of art and photography closer together remained tenuous and inconsequential, ranging from experiments in photo dynamics by the most important Portuguese modernist painter, Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, to the presence of naturalist painters on the juries of photographic exhibitions, and the distancing of the new modernist artistic generation from the photographic object.

It was within this context that, at the end of the 1920s, a new generation of photo-reporters was to establish itself, once again without any specific and specialised training, but instead learning and adopting practices in an empirical manner based on the experience of a whole first generation who had helped to found the early stages of Portuguese photo-reportage.

While the political and social challenges that had marked the production of this first generation were, above all, those arising from the conjunctural changes taking place in many of the basic premises of mass communication, this second generation was to find itself confronted with the use of its photographic material from a more consolidated perspective, in keeping with the modernisation of the illustrated press.

The creation of *O Notícias Ilustrado* (1928-1935) in 1928 signalled a new break with the past and a genuine innovation, since this was the first periodical to be printed using the rotogravure process exclusively, accompanying the appearance of some of the most influential international periodicals of this genre, whose graphic editing was to be entrusted to a film director, Leitão de Barros.

O Notícias Ilustrado brought innovations and a complete break with all of the

previous models, and it was in this context that all of the second generation of photo-reporters were to establish an aesthetic of their own, aware of the typographic dynamics that epitomised various languages, ranging from the cinema to the graphic composition between text and image.

The alliance between text and image was to be decisive in establishing a new lexicon, in which the general watchwords were movement and photomontage. In the pages of *O Notícias Ilustrado* were to be found condensed renderings of some of the aesthetic and typographic lessons that Russian constructivism and the Bauhaus school were recommending at that time for the modern mass media, and which other Portuguese illustrated periodicals were later to follow, as was the case with *O Século Ilustrado* (1938-1977), also edited by Leitão de Barros.

The literary texts of the new authors were illustrated with photo-reportages produced by the new photographers, seeking to establish a formal unity and a common sense of aesthetics. The photographic image was to establish itself as a central axis for the construction of the news, and it was around the image or a composition of images that the whole narrative text of the news item was constructed, resulting in an absolutely new version of this relationship between the different means of communication.

The producers of images for this new model therefore played a major role in the whole of the mass communication taking place during this period, and the images that they produced further extended their journalistic objectives, given the wide range of meanings that these same images were beginning to take on in the modern political context.

The exploration of documentary image aesthetic determined the graphic design of the press during this period, and this vanguard movement was to include such prominent names as Salazar Dinis, Denis Salgado, **Ferreira da Cunha, João Martins, Mário Novais** and Horácio Novais, as well as Judah Benoliel.

These were the authors of the great proliferation of images produced at that time, which were to be re-used for ideological purposes. They were subsequently absorbed into the propaganda mechanisms of the dictatorial regime of the New State, which in

1932 established new directions for their use and interpretation.

In 1932, when Oliveira Salazar became the first civilian to take office as the leader of the 8th Government of the military dictatorship, first imposed, as we have said, in 1926, the transition to a civilian dictatorship was ensured, later enshrined in the 1933 Constitution. It is particularly relevant that, in this same year, the Secretariado Nacional de Propaganda (SPN) had been created, and that this body was to be immediately associated with a photographic archive, whose overall guidelines and scope were to determine many of the new regime's propaganda strategies.

The SPN was to be responsible for a whole series of initiatives that would bring together not only photographers, but also a whole new generation of artists, architects, decorators, writers and intellectuals, in order to guarantee the production of all the regime's major propaganda events, ranging from illustrated publications to national exhibitions and the Portuguese presence at the great international and universal expositions.

At its outset, the regime's propaganda strategy required a stock of images that could be channelled from the press to the main illustrated editions of the 1930s, and that would be used to promote the figure of the leader, Oliveira Salazar, and his government's actions. In this context, the first great illustrated album to be published by the regime, *Portugal 1934*, symbolised the beginning of this ideological use through the collection of a corpus of images originating from photo-reportage, which would be republished and worked upon using photomontage, in an exuberant graphical composition, in which the association of images composed the framework for the allegorical concepts on which the regime's image would be based.

All the photo-reporters mentioned earlier were included in this album and their pictures would thereafter be incorporated into the SPN's photographic archive³, as well as being used to structure all of its graphic output until the 1960s.

Another sphere of image production, with the same propaganda purposes, includes the

³The collection of images belonging to this body is currently available in the photographic archive of the Direcção Geral dos Arquivos/Torre do Tombo, Lisbon.

album about the colonial exhibition of 1934⁴, arising out of the exhibition held at the Palácio de Cristal in Porto, itself organised under the auspices of the fascist policy for the affirmation of the Portuguese colonial empire. The pictures that make up the album also represent a complete break with the documentary models of colonial photography practised during the 19th century. Domingos Alvão, its author, placed at the service of the photographic reporting of the event a rather disturbingly naturalising aesthetic purpose, which could be interpreted in the context of a colonial representation with very precise ideological designs.

The journalistic, commissioned, nature of photographic image production on which the New State founded these first publications, characterised the formal nature of these images as both objective and real, a combination that was confused with the concept of truth, and which efficiently and pragmatically served the ideological purpose that the regime was to make of such images for mass publicity.

The successful recognition that had been achieved by the vanguard of Portuguese photo-reportage by the beginning of the 20th century was not, however, matched by any assimilation or theoretical and critical interpretation of the photographic object in other fields, as already mentioned. Portuguese artistic modernity did not include any theory of photography or any formal, institutionalised practice, remaining aloof from the international artistic vanguards that had already incorporated photography into their aesthetic discourse.

In this way, not only did the avant-garde nature of the journalistic photographic discourse fail to be recognised and assimilated, but also no other coherent photographic representations produced at that time proved capable of renewing the pictorialist/naturalist aesthetics that had been developed in the 19th century. Photography continued to be ignored by art critics, and the aesthetic defence of this art form was only provided by the same circle of amateur photographers who had promoted it in the 19th century, even though, in certain cases, they were reluctant to assert its artistic value on a footing equal to that of painting.

⁴Domingos Alvão, *Álbum fotográfico da 1ª Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (Porto, 1934)

The importance and predominance with which artistic photography had established itself in the 19th century, under the form of an “salonnard” amateurism pursuit indulged in by a social elite, with little in common with painting and operating in an as yet uncharted area, seemed to crystallise in an aesthetic that, in the 1930s, still favoured the bromoil and gum bichromate techniques, receiving its artistic recognition through its acceptance at the photographic salons of the Société Française de Photographie.

Nonetheless, there was a definite growth in motifs, with a shift from the prevailing fashion for rural landscapes to maritime and urban themes, the latter being marked by stark contrasts, with sombre, picturesque atmospheres being chosen as the preferred subject matter. Once again, it was within the context of journalistic dissemination that a certain renewal of form and content took place, cutting across all types of artistic photography, since in the field of strictly photographic presentations, at the salons, the prevailing fashions continued to be influenced by 19th-century models.

In the first three decades of the 20th century, Portugal saw a shift in the operations and paradigm of amateur photography, just as was happening internationally, as a consequence of the technical developments that allowed for a mass access to photography, changing the elitist parameters of its practice and obliging photographic associations, to some extent all over the world, to undertake a similar reformulation of their aims and sphere of influence.

With the increasing incorporation of the photograph as an artistic object into international artistic movements, historical photographic associations took upon themselves the task of promoting amateur photography, by setting up their own circles in which to practice and publicise photography, which was generally excluded from the art world at the time. In this sense, a parallel photographic circle of artistic expression was created, which was to remain rooted in a pictorialist photographic tradition, even though, over the course of the 20th century, dialogue, heterogeneity and even complete aesthetic breaks with the past were still possible within these old and respected associations, as was the case in Portugal.

It was in this context that, in the early 1930s, the panorama of Portuguese

amateur/artistic photography was to undergo yet another change, with the officialisation and coverage of its aims within the Grémio Português de Fotografia (Portuguese Guild of Photography), created in 1931, reformulating the Sociedade Portuguesa de Photographia (Portuguese Photographic Society), which had originally dated from the beginning of the century.

With the organisation of the *1st National Exhibition of Photographic Art*, in 1932, an attempt was made to bring together jury members from other areas, namely from cinema and the visual arts, while the acceptance of works by both amateurs and professionals sought to generate a dialogue that would later be marked by increasing controversy.

This exhibition did, however, demonstrate the prevalence of amateur photographers who defended pictorialism. Participants also included some of the second generation of photo-reporters, which clearly showed photography's overall indecisiveness over whether to adopt modernity or to maintain the pictorialist tradition.

Curiously, in 1930, in one of the main art exhibitions of the decade, the *1st Exhibition of Independent Artists*, in which a new generation questioned the aesthetic tradition, photography was in fact represented, although somewhat hidden away in the Decorative Arts section. Participating in the exhibition was Mário Novais, who had always remained outside the orbit of the Guild, photographic associations and their respective manifestations, while there was also the unaccustomed and unusual participation of two writers, Branquinho da Fonseca and Edmundo de Bettencourt, who contributed images of a somewhat surrealistic nature.

Together with Mário Novais, João Martins represented the expression of that ambivalence between the modernist path in photo-reportage and the contamination in subsequent decades of archaic aesthetic models, always acting in defence of a naturalist, figurative and prosaic photographic art.

Neither the photographers who enjoyed links with the Portuguese artistic vanguard, such as Mário Novais, nor the informed and up-to-date opinions of the photographer

and cameraman António Mendes, published in 1931⁵, in which he introduced people to the work of Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, enabled a more enlightened understanding about the role of photography in society and art.

At the end of the 1930s, Portuguese photography remained limited by its ambivalence over the artistic nature of photography and its place of production. At the same time it was becoming marked by the languages of modernity through the photographic realism of reportage. The associative dynamics of amateur photography gained in importance, as did the clearly limiting understanding of the artistic validity of pictorialism or picturesque naturalism, revealing a growing resistance to any form of divisive aesthetics. The ideological use of photography and the dynamics of production that this was about to develop would shortly become the terrain for the exhibition of all these tendencies, as well as for the aesthetic and “patriotic” legitimization of its particular statements.

⁵ António Mendes, *A Fotografia é uma arte?*, in *O Notícias Ilustrado* (Lisbon, 25 October, 1931), pp. 17, 22.